

VZCZCXRO9079

PP RUEHDBU RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHROV
DE RUEHVJ #2996/01 3311341

ZNY SSSSS ZZH

P 271341Z NOV 06

FM AMEMBASSY SARAJEVO

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4902

INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/JCS WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RUFOAOA/USNIC SARAJEVO PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/OSD WASHDC PRIORITY

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 SARAJEVO 002996

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DEPT FOR EUR (DICARLO), D (SMITH), P (BAME), EUR/SCE (HOH,
SAINZ, FOOKS), AND EUR/RPM (BROTZEN), NSC FOR BRAUN, USNIC
FOR WIGHTMAN, OSD FOR MARK JONES, USNATO FOR SHAFFER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/27/2016

TAGS: PREL PGOV MARR BK

SUBJECT: BOSNIA: POST-ELECTION MOD SHAKE-UP COULD FURTHER
SLOW DEFENSE REFORM

REF: A) SARAJEVO 2259 B) SARAJEVO 2638

Classified By: Amb. Douglas McElhaney for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Many contacts within and outside the Ministry of Defense tell us that it is unlikely Minister of Defense Nikola Radovanovic will keep his post in a new government. The departure of Radovanovic, a Serb, may also lead to a strong push to replace the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Lt. Gen. Sifet Podzic, a Bosniak, before the expiration of his term in office. Taken together, these two moves could present a setback to Bosnian defense reform, which has already begun to stumble in the face of difficult decisions over personnel and property. In recent months, we have engaged in numerous public expressions of support for the defense reform agenda and the minister. Ultimately, short of injecting ourselves into the coalition negotiation process, we believe the most useful means of influencing the process is to make clear our expectation that defense reform be fully implemented, and that the process be headed by a balanced, capable, and apolitical defense team. End summary.

DEFENSE MINISTER RADOVANOVIC: ONE FOOT OUT THE DOOR?

¶2. (C) It appears increasingly unlikely that Defense Minister Nikola Radovanovic will be part of the next Bosnian government. As a politically unaffiliated Bosnian-Serb, Radovanovic's position has always been somewhat tenuous. In recent weeks, RS Prime Minister and SNSD President Milorad Dodik has publicly renounced "Serb claim" on the MOD post, going so far as to say in a recent interview that his party sought no leadership role in "the phony army." Dodik's comments have been echoed in private as well, with the RS Prime Minister telling us and Radovanovic that the Minister could stay only if he did not "count against" Serb seats in the Council of Ministers (COM). Defense and Security Advisor to the Chairman of the Presidency, Dzuro Beronja, confirmed the SNSD approach, telling us that SNSD did not consider the MOD portfolio that valuable.

¶3. (C) Radovanovic has been ambivalent about his future. In recent discussions with us he has said that he does not want to retain his position, underscoring that he is tired from both the exhaustive work and political infighting in the MOD.

Embassy contacts both within and outside the Ministry have observed that Radovanovic's commitment to seeing through the reform agenda has waned in recent months. The uniformed military leadership has been particularly vocal in its concerns that the Minister has slowed the personnel process, leaving their futures in limbo. According to a senior member of the NATO staff in Sarajevo working in the MOD, Radovanovic has recently "not been decisive."

14. (S) One possible successor is current Deputy Defense Minister Enes Becirbasic, a Bosniak with strong ties to the Party for Democratic Action (SDA), who is known to be angling for the job. NATO had previously investigated Becirbasic over questions that he had failed to resign his military commission before accepting the deputy minister slot as required by law. (Note. The NATO review found no evidence that Becirbasic had resigned his commission, but NATO was reluctant to remove him from his post. End note.) Another rumored replacement is Ramiz Drekovic, a former wartime commander and current unofficial military advisor to the Federation Prime Minister. Drekovic, who has ties to both SDA and newly elected presidency member Haris Silajdzic's Party for BiH (SBiH), faced wide criticism during the war for his ineffectual leadership of the Bosnian Army's V Corps and other units.

AS GOES RADOVANOVIC, SO GOES PODZIC?

15. (S) If a Bosniak, as is rumored, replaces Radovanovic, there will be strong pressure within political and military circles to replace Lt. Gen. Podzic to preserve ethnic balance at the senior level of the defense leadership. Though

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Podzic, a strong supporter of defense reform and Bosnian overseas deployments, has two years remaining on his term, a new defense minister could recommend his retirement to the Presidency. (Note. The choice of the CHOD is supposed to be divorced from the political process. End note.) In this scenario, a senior Bosnian-Serb military commander would likely replace Podzic as chairman of the joint chiefs. Podzic has stated that he expects to be a victim of a MOD shake-up, and has asked for support from the senior NATO staff. A NATO official told us that the NATO commander would support Podzic finishing his term, but does not have the power to block Podzic's legal replacement.

16. (C) Ideally, Podzic should finish his full term as prescribed by law. It would establish a clear precedent of a professional, apolitical senior uniformed leadership that is immune from changes resulting from the electoral cycle. Working through the NATO command in Sarajevo, we have a decent chance of keeping Podzic as chairman for the legal duration of his term. Doing so, however, also contains certain political drawbacks. Keeping Podzic, our strong partner and committed proponent of defense reform, could serve to isolate Bosnian-Serbs from the reform process by turning the top two defense positions in Sarajevo over to Bosniaks. Consequently, the locus of power for Bosnian-Serbs in the defense structures could return to Banja Luka, where senior Bosnian-Serbs military leaders will be commanding the VI Infantry Brigade and Support Command.

SEEKING A CROAT ALTERNATIVE

17. (C) A direct effort to force governing coalition partners to agree on a specific defense minister candidate could undermine our own preference to keep the portfolio apolitical, and directly draw us into further discussions about other ministries and government composition. Considering Dodik's position and the general political situation, the best outcome we could hope for is to have an

apolitical Croat take over the minister's slot. One possibility is current Assistant Defense Minister for International Cooperation Zoran Sajinovic, a Croat, who also heads the inter-agency Partnership for Peace working group. Though his name has yet to surface as a possible candidate, we can attempt to steer the debate to a candidate like Sajinovic by continuing to stress the need for competent, committed, and "balanced" leadership at the helm of the MOD.

DEFENSE REFORM IMPLEMENTATION ALREADY SLOWING

18. (C) Even outside the political wrangling over MOD leadership, some crucial elements of defense reform have been put on hold (see reftels). The MOD missed its initial October 1 deadline to finish its personnel decisions for both the ministry and armed forces. While the selection committees are currently meeting, it is an open question as to whether the new deadline of December 21 will be realized. A senior NATO advisor told us that the deadline could be met, but it would require the selection boards to work late and on weekends, possibly sacrificing quality decision-making for the sake of finishing work by the end of the year. The key property issues of the new state-level ministry and army are even further from resolution. Both the Federation and RS have balked at transferring both immovable (land, buildings) and movable (weapons) property to the state-level institutions without guarantees that the proceeds of any future sales of the property would be transferred back to the entities. Apparently in an effort to avoid a drawn-out political fight with the entity governments, Radovanovic failed to sign the order transferring the property until last week. The order now needs approval from the state-level COM and entity governments, which is not expected in the near-term, without concessions from the MOD. In another unwelcome development, newly elected RS President Milan Jelic recently appointed a military advisor to his own staff, directly contradicting the spirit, if not the letter, of the defense reform law.

COMMENT: DEFENSE REFORM LEADERSHIP KEY TO ITS SUCCESS

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19. (C) The creation of a single, unified armed forces is critical to Bosnia's long-term peace and security. Defense reform accomplishments of the past two years have been substantial and have gone a long way in establishing a NATO compatible force capable of deploying in overseas missions. We have been very active in trumpeting the successes of defense reform and reminding Bosnians that the USG is watching its development closely (reftel A). The Ambassador has appeared at a series of public events throughout the fall with Radovanovic and Podzic and publicly praised their leadership. We believe it is crucial that the defense process continues to be headed by an apolitical, balanced and committed leadership team, and will continue to deliver that message to the Bosnian political leadership. This is more important to the long-term health of defense reform than freezing the current leadership in place.

MCELHANEY